

A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that only 25 percent of Americans exercise regularly, while another 25 percent get no exercise at all. Americans have apparently forgotten how to move. So nobody should have been surprised by this week's Rand Corp. report that the proportion of Americans who are severely obese has quadrupled since 1986 ("Severe and extreme obesity rates pushing out seams," The Oregonian, Oct. 14).

Part of the reason for our increasingly passive lifestyle is that we've overlooked the critical link between community design and personal health. In our attempt to decrease traffic congestion, we've engineered personal activity out of our lives. We've designed streets and parking lots for cars, not pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders. We fail to provide safe street crossings, even at schools, in the interest of smoother traffic flow. We isolate shopping areas from neighborhoods, preventing people from biking or walking to do errands. As a result, we drive nearly everywhere; for trips of less than a mile, 75 percent of us insist on using our cars.

Our overdependence on driving not only degrades the livability of our communities and the environment but also harms our children. They may not know their neighbors' names, but they know how long it takes to drive to fast-food restaurants. They cannot walk or bike to school or the park because there are no safe sidewalks. Having no safe way to explore on their own, their knowledge of their community is defined by what they see from their parents' car. From 1975 to 1996, the number of trips American children made by bicycle or foot declined 40 percent. Today, only one-third of American children who live within a mile of their school walk or bike there. Driven to most destinations, our children miss out on badly needed exercise, as well as the opportunity to learn independence and gain self-confidence.

Slowly, the vital link between walkable communities and personal health is gaining more attention in Congress. In September, the House voted 327-90 to restore the popular Transportation Enhancements program, continuing federal funding for local bike and recreational trails and pedestrian facilities. The Pedestrian and Cyclist Equity Bill, which would fund a federal Safe Routes to School program, is gaining momentum. We still have an uphill battle to reauthorize a good transportation bill, but there is a growing recognition that investing in a wide range of transportation choices not only improves community and personal health but is also the only way to get the bill passed.

Locally, the most important step you can take is with your own feet. Most communities in

Oregon are working to make walking and bicycling easier, but we've got a long way to go. Every person, every day, has the choice of taking the stairs instead of the elevator, of walking or biking instead of driving for short trips, of helping our children learn how to become safe pedestrians and responsible cyclists. What better way to start along this path than to encourage your children to walk or bicycle to school?

While you're out walking, identify the obstacles that prevent you from fully participating in your community, then work with local officials at your schools and cities to get them fixed. Our communities, our health and our children all depend on it.

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